

The FBI documents

It amused us to note that Wednesday's initial dispatches from the reading room of the Federal Bureau of Investigation differed about the weight of the more than 40,000 documents released by that agency about its investigation of the Kennedy assassination. The Associated Press put the weight at "half a ton," while a reporter for the *Baltimore Sun* described "a floor-to-ceiling stack of papers, weighing more than 300 pounds."

If it is hard to guess the weight of a stack of documents, it is even harder to see what new light, if any, they shed on President Kennedy's assassination or the way J. Edgar Hoover's agency handled it.

Preliminary trekking through this paper blizzard does, however, suggest a few provisional conclusions:

1. The verdict of the Warren Commission report — that Lee Harvey Oswald, acting alone, shot and killed John Kennedy in Dallas — stands intact.

2. The attention of the FBI to a weird assortment of tips and "leads," many of them perfectly absurd, was exemplary in its diligence — far more so than it needed to be and the more remarkable in view of the FBI's early conclusion that Oswald had been the killer.

3. The FBI, like other administration officials, was less troubled by evidentiary puzzles than by the impossibility of proving negatives. Courtney Evans, reporting to J. Edgar Hoover on a communication with Deputy Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach, lamented that "we are being called upon, in many instances, to prove the negative (and) Katzenbach notes it is more difficult to prove that something did not happen than . . . to prove that it did happen." "More difficult" does scant justice to the problem. The fretting about proving negatives was to recur in the Warren Commission report. But with little noticeable impact on the amateur sleuths who flocked about the tragic event, making a career (and sometimes profit) out of fanciful games with the web of circumstance surrounding the assassination.

4. The FBI, in a manner characteristic of the Hoover days, was very touchy about intrusions on its turf, whether they involved an ambassador "playing Sherlock Holmes" in Mexico City or the Dallas chief of police making casual pub-

lic remarks about failures of liaison between the FBI and his office — remarks that an indignant Mr. Hoover saw as "lies" but which later proved to be true, or largely so.

This sensitivity prompted FBI lobbying against the mounting consensus in the White House and elsewhere that rampant public doubt and mushrooming conspiracy fantasies ought to be quieted, if they could be, by an independent blue-ribbon inquiry.

The FBI's attempt to avert that inquiry, which even included telephone calls to *The Washington Post* in the hope of heading off editorials, is revealing in view of what people of conspiratorial mind might make of it. Their tendency, as we know, is to attribute esoteric or sinister motives to predictable official behavior. When it sought to head off an independent probe, the FBI was motivated — that is, Mr. Hoover and his top adjutants were motivated — by vanity. It was feared, for no visible reason, that the inquiry might seem to reflect insulting doubts about the diligence or competence of the Bureau. But it is infinitely more thrilling to suppose, however gratuitously, that the FBI must have "something to hide": something more interesting to hide, that is, than a few human slipups in an agency that cultivated an air of infallibility.

In this connection, it is worth recalling that when the House of Representatives last year set up a select committee to review the Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations, its first director (who later quit) defended an outlandish investigative budget by citing the need to go over, again, all the ground the FBI had traversed in 1963-64.

Our own view, to repeat it here, is that Congress could more usefully spend such a sum developing a pill to neutralize the peculiar body chemistry of compulsive conspiracy theorists. Their main symptom is an inability — or unwillingness — to grasp the frustrating truth that in many historic episodes, prosaic or sensational, the role of muddle, confusion, freakishness can never be discounted. We all find it easier to live in an intelligible world, where human motives and acts are both logical and accountable. Ours is not such a world. We do not expect this or indeed the next blizzard of FBI documents to show that it is such a world, either.